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# THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE.

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## RIDDLES FROM NEGRO SCHOOL-CHILDREN IN NEW ORLEANS, LA.

COLLECTED BY A. E. PERKINS.

[THE riddles here collected were written down in March, 1920, by Negro public-school children of the McDonough School 6 in New Orleans, La., and sent to me by the principal, Mr. A. E. Perkins, B.S., Ph.D., without his alteration or correction. The school draws from a district of English-speaking colored people, many of whom come from Mississippi. It is noticeable that the riddles show no trace of riddle-making as a live art. All are of English origin; there is not, so far as I know, a single native African riddle among them; no local changes or inventions occur (with the possible exception of 3 and 5) either of pattern or of subject-matter; not an original riddle appears in the whole list. The majority are of the modern conundrum type. Of the sixty-four folk-riddles, thirty-six have preserved the English rhymed form. This differs from the Jamaica habit, where the rhyme is likely to break down and the riddle to fall into pattern form. Only six story-riddles occur, but several of these were given more than once; and the elaborate explanations perhaps indicate a taste still active for this kind of riddling.—MARTHA WARREN BECKWITH.]

### FOLK-RIDDLES.

1. Round as a butterbowl,  
Deep as a cup.  
The Mississippi River  
Cannot fill it up.  
*Ans.* Sifter, strainer.
2. Round as a biscuit,  
Busy as a bee,  
If you guess that,  
You can have poor me.  
*Ans.* Watch.

*(Variant.)*

Round as a biscuit,  
 Busy as a bee,  
 The prettiest little thing  
 That I ever did see.

3. My walls are red,  
 My tenants are black,  
 My color is green  
 All over my back.  
*Ans.* Watermelon.
4. Black within and red without,  
 Four corners round about.  
*Ans.* Chimney.
5. Large as a house,  
 Small as a mouse,  
 Bitter as gall,  
 And sweet, after all.  
*Ans.* Pecan (tree and nut).
6. Open like a barn-door,  
 Shut like a trap.  
 Guess all your lifetime,  
 You won't guess that.  
*Ans.* Pair of corsets.
7. Round as an apple,  
 Deep as a cup,  
 And all the king's horses  
 Can't pull it up.  
*Ans.* Well.
8. Taller than a house,  
 Taller than a tree.  
 Oh, whatever can it be?  
*Ans.* Star.
9. Thirty white horses  
 On a red hill.  
 Now they tramp, now they romp,  
 Now they stand still.  
*Ans.* Teeth and gum.
10. House full, room full,  
 And can't catch a spoonful.  
*Ans.* Smoke.
11. As crooked as a ram's horn,<sup>1</sup>  
 Teeth like a cat.  
 Guess all your lifetime,  
 You will never guess that.  
*Ans.* Brier-bush.

<sup>1</sup> *Variant:* Crooked as a rainbow.

12. Rough on the outside,  
Smooth within;  
Nothing can enter  
But a big flat thing.  
When it enters,  
It wiggles about,  
And that is the time  
The goodie comes out.

*Ans.* Oyster.

13. A riddle, a riddle, as I suppose:  
A hundred eyes and never a nose.

*Ans.* Sifter.

14. From house to house he goes,  
A messenger small and slight,  
And whether it rains or snows,  
He sleeps out in the night.

*Ans.* Path.

15. Four legs up and four legs down,  
Soft in the middle, and hard all 'round.

*Ans.* Bed.

16. Long big black fellow,  
Pull the trigger, make it bellow, — Bang!

*Ans.* Gun.

17. Black we are, but much admired,  
Men seek for us till we are tired;  
We tire the horse, but comfort man:  
Tell me this riddle if you can.

*Ans.* Coal.

18. In marble walls as white as milk,  
Lined with a skin as soft as silk,  
Within a fountain crystal-clear,  
A golden apple doth appear.  
No doors there are to this stronghold,  
Yet thieves break in and steal the gold.

*Ans.* Egg.

(*Variant.*) A little white house with no windows or doors, but yet  
robbers break in and steal the gold. — *Ans.* Egg.

19. Patch upon patch,  
A hole in the middle:  
Guess that riddle,  
I'll give you a gold fiddle.  
*Ans.* Chimney (of patched dirt).

20. Through the woods, through the woods I ran,  
And as little as I am, I killed a man.  
What is it?

*Ans.* Bullet.

21. Hicky More, Hocky More,  
On the king's kitchen door.  
All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't pull Hicky More, Hocky More,  
Off the king's kitchen door.

*Ans.* Sunshine.

22. As I was going through the garden-gap,  
Whom should I meet but Jimmie Red-Cap;  
A stick in his mouth, a stone in his throat:  
If you tell me this riddle, I give you a groat.

*Ans.* Cherry.

*(Variant.)*

As I was going through the garden-gate,  
Whom should I meet but Dickie Red-Cap,  
With a stick in his hand and a stone in his throat:  
If you guess my riddle, I will give you a goat.

23. Old Mother Twitchet had but one eye,  
And a long tail which she let fly;  
And every time she went over a gap,  
She left a bit of her tail in the trap.

*Ans.* Needle and thread.

*(Variant.)* I had a little sister; she had one eye and a long tail. Every time she went through the gap, her tail got shorter and shorter.

24. Little Anne Etticoat  
In a white petticoat  
And a red nose.  
The longer she stands,  
The shorter she grows.

*Ans.* Candle.

25. Twelve pears were hanging high,  
Twelve men came riding by.  
Each man took a pear:  
How many pears were left on the tree?

*Ans.* Eleven (the man's name was Eachman).

*(Variant.)*

Eleven hats hanging high,  
Eleven men came riding by.  
Each man took a hat,  
And that left eleven still.



34. What relation is that one to its own father who is not its father's own son? — *Ans.* Daughter.

35. Two people were sitting on a log, — a large and a small one. The large one was the small one's father, but the small one was not his son. — *Ans.* His daughter.

36. There was a man of yore. He was neither on land, nor in the sea, nor in the air. Where was he? — *Ans.* Jonah in the whale's belly.

37. I haven't got it, don't want it, wouldn't have it. But if I had it, I would not take the whole world for it. — *Ans.* Bald head.

38. I have an apple I can't cut, a blanket I can't fold, and so much money I can't count it. — *Ans.* Moon, stars, sky.

39. At night they come without being fetched, and by day they are lost without being stolen. — *Ans.* Stars.

40. Come up and let us go; go down, and here we stay. — *Ans.* Anchor.

41. When pulled, it is a cane; when pushed, it is a tent. — *Ans.* Umbrella.

42. When held, it goes; when let loose, it lies down. — *Ans.* Pen.

43. The man who made it did not want it; the man who used it did not want it. — *Ans.* Coffin.

44. Go all 'round the house and make but one track. — *Ans.* Wheelbarrow.

45. 'Live at each end, and dead in the middle. — *Ans.* Plough (man and mule at each end).

46. If he come, he no come; if he no come, he come. — *Ans.* If the crows come eat the corn, it would not come up; if the crows did not come and eat the corn, it would come up.

47. On a hill there stood a house, and in the house there was a shelf, and on that shelf there was a cup; in that cup there was some suck, and you couldn't get that suck unless you broke that cup. — *Ans.* Egg.

48. Goes up white, and comes down yellow. — *Ans.* Egg.

49. Upon the house, white as snow; down on the ground, yellow as gold. — *Ans.* Egg.

50. On a hill stands a house; in the house stands a trunk; in this trunk there is something nobody wants. — *Ans.* Death.

51. Four legs and can't walk, four eyes and can't see, and smokes a pipe. — *Ans.* Chimney.

52. White as a lily, it's not a lily; green as grass, it's not grass; red as fire, it's not fire; sweet as sugar, it's not sugar; black as ink, it's not ink. What is it? — *Ans.* Blackberry.

(*Variant.*) White as snow, green as grass, black as smut.

53. Red as blood, but blood it's not; black as ink, but ink it's not; white as milk, but milk it's not; green as grass, but grass it's not. — *Ans.* Watermelon.

54. Four stiff standers, two lookers, two crookers, and one switch-box. — *Ans.* Cow.

55. Two heads, no neck, no arms, no legs, no face. — *Ans.* Barrel.

(*Variant.*) What object has two heads and one body?

56. Tip tip upstairs, tip tip downstairs. If you don't mind out, tip will bite you. — *Ans.* Bee.

57. Two legs sat upon three legs with one leg on his lap. In comes four legs, takes up one leg. Up jumps two legs, snatches up three legs, throws three legs at four legs, and makes four legs bring back one leg. — *Ans.* A leg of mutton, a man, a dog, and a stool.

58. Four legs sat on two legs with four legs standing by. — *Ans.* Maid milking a cow.

59. As I was going through the world of Wicky Wacky, I met Bone Backy. I called Tom Tacky to run Bone Backy out of the world of Wicky Wacky. — *Ans.* Field of corn, a cow, and a dog.

60. Once a slave's master told him if he could find a riddle that his master could not guess, he would set him free. This is the riddle. What is it that never slew anything, but yet slew twelve? — *Ans.* It is a crow that ate of a poisoned horse; and twelve murderers ate of the crow, and died.

61. Six set and seven sprung, —  
Out of the dead the living run.

*Ans.* A quail sat on six eggs, and hatched them  
in a dead horse-head. She and her little  
ones made seven.

62. Love I sit, love I stand,<sup>1</sup>  
Love I hold fast in my hand.

*Ans.* There was a lady that had a dog whose  
name was Love. When this dog died, she  
took his skin and patched a chair, her shoes,  
and her glove.

<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania German Riddles (JAFL 19 [1906] : 105); Guilford County, South Carolina (JAFL 30 [1917] : 203).



63.

Horn eat a horn up a white oak-tree.<sup>1</sup>

If you guess that riddle, you may hang me.

*Ans.* A runaway slave, having been pursued till he took to a tree, was promised, by the white master who pursued him, his acquittal for killing a man, provided he told them a riddle they could not answer. He said this riddle. The man's name was Horn. He boiled a dead calf's horn, and ate it up in the tree.

64.

I sat high, I looked low.

I looked for one to come, but two did come.

The wind did blow, my heart did ache,

To see what a den the fox did make.

*Ans.* There was once a lady that had promised to marry a young man. He told his sweetheart to meet him a certain place in the woods. Now, this young lady was very rich; and this young man was going to kill her and take her jewels and money. When she reached the woods, she found a fresh grave dug. She wondered what this meant. She said she would climb a tree and wait until her beau came. She looked for him to come alone, but he brought some one else with him. They both waited and waited, but she did not come. After a while they left, then she too went home. The same night her beau came home and asked why wasn't she in the woods. She told him she had a riddle for him to guess, and if he guesses it right she will still marry him. However, he did not guess it; so she told him, and they did not remain friends any more.

## MODERN CONUNDRUMS.

65. What is the beginning of every end, and the end of every place?  
— Letter *e*.

66. What is the usefulest thing in the house and the least thought of? — Dish-cloth.

67. What is that which, by losing an eye, has nothing but a nose? —  
*Ans.* Noise.

68. How many boiled eggs may a man eat on an empty stomach?  
*Ans.* One: after that, his stomach wouldn't be empty.

<sup>1</sup> Guilford County, South Carolina (JAFL 30 [1917]: 203).

69. What is the oldest table in the world? — *Ans.* Multiplication table.

70. Who are the two largest ladies in the world? — *Ans.* Missouri and Mississippi.

71. What is it that you can feed, but can't give water? — *Ans.* Fire.

72. What is it that a man can give to a lady, and can't give to another man? — *Ans.* A husband.

73. What is the best way to keep a man's love? — *Ans.* Don't return it.

74. What is it a lady's husband can never see her with it on? — *Ans.* A widow's veil.

75. If a bear were to go into a dry-goods store, what would he want? — *Ans.* Muzzlin' (muslin).

76. Who was the first whistler, and what tune did he whistle? — *Ans.* The wind. He whistled "Over the hills and far away."

77. What is that you can hold in your left hand, and not in your right? — *Ans.* Your right elbow.

78. If you saw a dude riding on a donkey, what fruit would it remind you of? — *Ans.* A pear (pair).

79. What is it that doesn't ask questions, and requires answers? — *Ans.* The door-bell.

80. What is it you will break if you even name it? — *Ans.* Silence.

81. What is the sure sign of early spring? — *Ans.* A cat watching a hole with her back up.

82. What would happen if a colored waiter carrying a dish of turkey swimming in grease should accidentally let it fall? — *Ans.* It would be the fall of Turkey, the overthrow of Greece, the breaking up of China, and the ruin of Africa.

83. What is the key-note to good manners? — *Ans.* Be natural (B natural).

84. Who is the greatest of home-rulers? — *Ans.* The baby.

85. What is it that belongs to you, yet is used more by your friends than by you? — *Ans.* Your name.

86. What word makes a girl a woman? — *Ans.* Age.

87. What is the largest room in the world? — *Ans.* Room for improvement.

88. If a man is born in England, raised in France, and died in Montreal, what is he? — A dead man.

89. In what place did the cock crow so that all the world could hear him? — In Noah's Ark.

90. What subject can be made light of? — Gas.

91. What snuff-box is that whose box gets fuller the more pinches he takes? — *Ans.* Candle-snuffers.

92. What does a lawyer do when he dies? — *Ans.* Lies still.

93. What is this it takes two to make one? — *Ans.* A bargain.

94. What is the first thing you do when you make biscuits? — *Ans.* Wash your hands.

95. What flower grows between your nose and your chin? — *Ans.* Tulips (two lips).

96. Why is the letter *a* like a honeysuckle? — *Ans.* Because a *b* (bee) follows it?

97. Why is a prudent man like a pen? — *Ans.* Because his head prevents him from going too far.

98. Why is a boy like flannel? — *Ans.* Because he shrinks from washing.

99. What is the difference between a sentence and a cat? — *Ans.* One has its pause at the end of its clause; the other, its claws at the end of its paws.

100. What is the difference between a soldier and a lady? — *Ans.* A soldier faces powder, and a lady powders her face.

101. What is the difference between a pie and a pair of trousers? — *Ans.* A pie has to be made before it is cut, and a pair of trousers has to be cut before it is made.

102. What is the difference between an auto and a horse? — *Ans.* They kick at different ends.

103. Why is a rooster on a fence like a penny? — *Ans.* Because the head is on one side, and the tail on the other.

104. What is the difference between an old penny and a new dime? — *Ans.* Nine cents difference.

105. Why is a room full of married people like an empty one? — *Ans.* Because there isn't a single person there.

106. Why is high tariff like overalls? — *Ans.* Because it protects the laboring-man.

107. What is the difference between a conductor or motorman and a cold in the head? — *Ans.* The conductor knows the stops, and the cold stops the nose.

108. What is the difference between a stubborn mule and a postage-stamp? — *Ans.* One you lick with a stick, and the other you stick with a lick.

109. Why do preachers preach without notes? — *Ans.* Because their families would starve without greenbacks.

110. Why does a stick of peppermint candy remind you of the United States? — *Ans.* Because it never has been licked.

111. Why did they make the Statue of Liberty's hand eleven inches instead of twelve inches? — *Ans.* Because, if it had been twelve inches, it would have been a foot instead of a hand.

112. Why does a hen lay an egg? — *Ans.* To give the rooster a chance to cackle.

113. Why is Philadelphia more subject to earthquakes than any other city? — *Ans.* Because she is a Quaker city.

114. Why do the Spaniards want Admiral Dewey's picture on their postage-stamps? — *Ans.* Because it's the only way they can lick him.

115. Why may a beggar wear a short coat? — *Ans.* Because it will be long enough before he gets another.

116. Why is a dog warm in winter, and colder in the summer? — *Ans.* Because in the winter he wears an overcoat; and in the summer, pants and shirts.

117. Why did the duck cross the pond? — *Ans.* Because she wants to get on the other side.

118. Why did the Kaiser defy the whole world? — *Ans.* Because he thought he could whip them.

119. Why is your nose in the middle of your face? — *Ans.* Because it is the scenter (centre).

120. Why did Webster write the words in the dictionary? — *Ans.* Because he knew them.

121. Why did Adam bite the apple Eve gave him? — *Ans.* Because he had no knife.

122. Why should architects make good actors? — *Ans.* Because they are fine at drawing houses.